



SERRC
Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>
ISSN: 2471-9560

Extending the Limits of Epistemic Neglect

Carla Carmona, University of Seville, ccarmona@us.es

Carmona, Carla. 2021. "Extending the Limits of Epistemic Neglect." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 10 (6): 51-57. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-5X2>.

The concept of *epistemic neglect* (EN) fills a conceptual lacuna by identifying a kind of epistemic injustice exercised by educators when they fail to extend ‘hopeful trust’, that is, the kind of trust that is knowingly extended despite the lack of evidential support (Brick 2020). The extension of hopeful trust “functions by instilling in the trusted person an attitude of hopeful self-trust” (493). Hopeful self-trust is portrayed as essential with a view to overcoming one’s present limitations and becoming a competent epistemic agent.

Although I share a great number of Shannon Brick’s ideas concerning EN, I will focus on two areas of disagreement:

The first area concerns Brick’s restriction of EN to *children in educational contexts*,

The second area concerns Brick’s remarks about Fricker’s notion of *testimonial injustice* (TI) being a trust injustice in which perpetrators deny speakers *evidence-based trust*.

In addition, I will draw attention to instances of EN in which the injustice is committed by speakers (not by hearers).

Beyond Children

Epistemic neglect (EN) sheds light on the need to address the *epistemic potential* of children despite lack of evidence; that is, on the need to engage with latent epistemic qualities and abilities that they haven’t *yet developed*. In this regard, the primary harm of EN does not have to do with one’s existing capacities. Rather, it is identified as “the thwarting of one’s capacity to become a competent epistemic agent” (Brick 2020, 496). In contrast, *testimonial injustice’s* (TI) primary harm is to be undermined/wronged as a subject of knowledge, regarding one’s existing epistemic aptness.

Why the focus on children? On one hand, Brick argues (493) that children are “rarely suitable targets of evidence-based trust”, as one is not born being competent. On the other hand, evidence-based self-trust (on which one can build hopeful self-trust) in their case needs to come from external sources, as it is unlikely that children have sufficient experience or awareness of past experience to trust their own epistemic potential (494).

My feeling is that this picture of EN draws the limits of the phenomenon unnecessarily narrow by restricting it to the epistemic potential of *children in educational contexts*. By contrast, I would like to argue that EN is a *widespread* injustice that concerns the epistemic potential of people in general, in particular marginalized identities.

Firstly, let us consider whether adults might also be victims of EN. In principle, adults should have sufficient past experience for them to base on it their self-trust. However, in the case of marginalized identities the story might be different. Marginalized identities might not

be able to build evidence-based self-trust despite having plenty of experience concerning their epistemic capacities. Their constant exposure to identity prejudice might have a negative influence on their psychological well-being and perception of their own epistemic agency. Not to mention that marginalization is likely to undermine their epistemic agency and deteriorate it. In fact, in the case of marginalized identities, past experience might lead to self-distrust. Suppose that someone has been subjected to credibility deficits throughout their life, a common denominator among marginalized identities. When looking at past experience, it is lack of credibility that they will find. The epistemic injustices that they have suffered are likely to provide them with a negative picture of themselves, among other things, as someone who is untrustworthy.

When caused by identity prejudice, EN is unlikely to come alone. Marginalized identities suffer from a variety of epistemic injustices that converge in complex feedback loops. As a result, marginalized knowers' self-trust is undermined from multiple angles. Consequently, marginalized knowers in general, regardless of their age, might be in need of hopeful trust coming from external sources. For instance, educators might also need to extend hopeful trust to teenagers and university students coming from marginalized identities.

Arguments in Jones (2012), who plays a fundamental role in Brick's paper, support the extension of EN to adults in the case of marginalized identities. We learn from her that "unjust social relations cause epistemic injustice, which undermines self-trust among the underprivileged" (Jones 2012, 237). One could counterargue that adults can fight the undermining of their self-trust by means of meta-reflection. However, we also learn from Jones (238) that "meta-reflection, or reflection on our cognitive strengths and limitations, is unlikely to be able to resolve the problem". When we lack self-trust, we are likely to "overlook our successes, and attribute them to situational factors, or plain luck" (238).

One could also think that adults, unlike children, have the capacity to identify and understand reasons, owing to marginalizing ideology, that explain the systematic discredit of their epistemic capacities. Brick's conception of trust also draws from Jones (1996; 2012). On her view, self-trust has both cognitive and affective elements. Accordingly, miscalibrated self-trust cannot be solved only in the domain of reasons. In fact, on Jones's (2012, 247) view, fixing under-calibration is a three-stage process, and the development of the right affective attitude toward one's cognitive competence comes third. Moreover, reasons related to marginalizing ideology generally become explicit in the context of an epistemic community.

Self-trust is created and developed interactively. Accordingly, recalibration of self-trust needs to be tackled in interaction with others, especially if socially undermined. It is true that marginalized adults, unlike children, can organize themselves in counterhegemonic epistemic communities and work together on their self-trust (249). That so, not everyone has access to such epistemic communities even in adulthood. For instance, for certain social identities it is particularly difficult to reach out or even identify themselves with the counterhegemonic epistemic group to which they belong. Regarding difficulty in self-identification, I have in mind intersex individuals who are not aware they are intersex, as their family hid this fact

from them. Regarding difficulty in reaching out and asking for help, consider the case of a severely isolated woman who suffers from gender violence.

In addition, the more longstanding the harm, the more difficult fixing the undermining of one's self-trust becomes. Accordingly, adults are likely to experience extra-difficulties in that respect in comparison to children. In fact, children who suffer EN do not need to be self-distrusting, as they are usually unaware that their capacity to become a competent epistemic agent is being thwarted. By contrast, people who have been exposed to epistemic injustices for a long time are likely to experience a loss of confidence, which might result in their self-trust being undermined.

I want to suggest that marginalized identities might also be victims of EN owing to epistemic vices other than prejudice. We could well imagine situations in which an unprejudiced professor, owing to carelessness or arrogance, fails to extend hopeful trust to a marginalized university student. Brick (2020, 497-498) discusses non-responsible instances of EN in which teachers fail to extend hopeful trust because institutional demands, or other external factors, constrain their agency. Unlike in Brick's examples, when owing to epistemic vice other than prejudice, the agent who ought to have extended hopeful trust can be held responsible for the injustice. For instance, the unprejudiced professor of my example.

Beyond Educational Contexts

Failing to extend hopeful trust might also be an epistemic injustice that goes *beyond* the educational context. Of course, one could also find other epistemic contexts, such as that of medical care, in which those with authority, for instance, a psychologist or a psychiatrist in the context of mental health, should extend hopeful epistemic trust. However, my proposal is more ambitious. This is connected to the second point I want to focus on: the assumption that it is *evidence-based trust* that is denied to speakers in instances of *testimonial injustice* (TI).

Differentiating the kind of trust missing in instances of *epistemic neglect* (EN) from the kind of trust lacking in testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007), Brick (491) states that perpetrators of TI deny speakers *evidence-based trust*. As I have argued elsewhere:

Such a formulation does not consider the great number of testimonial exchanges that take place on first or with little acquaintance, as a result of which there is little, if any, evidence available of either competence or sincerity. Consequently, the credibility of someone's piece of testimony has to be judged without having access to her track record (Carmona 2021, 10).

Going back to the comparison between EN and TI, I would say that it is not only in the case of children that we cannot base our credibility judgements on evidence. In many of our everyday epistemic interactions we engage with strangers. Besides, we might not have access to the epistemic track record of people with whom we are acquainted. Consider people living in the same apartment building in a big city. In sum, there might be lack of evidence in both

EN and TI, and lack of evidence makes those at the receiving end of such injustices more vulnerable.

By contrast, I would say that the main difference between EN and TI has to do with the fact that EN entails a failure to extend *hopeful* epistemic trust and TI entails a failure to extend *merited* epistemic trust. As we shall see, by ‘merited’ I don’t mean deserved on the basis of evidence only.

Observe that, to avoid EN, the hearer needs to address the epistemic potential of children and extend hopeful trust despite *manifest difficulty* in addressing a task or even despite *existing counterevidence* from past performance. I have argued that in cases of *testimonial void* (TV) the speaker’s obligation, *in the absence of counterevidence*, is to accord the hearer a minimum level of competence and willingness, a kind of trust that is rooted in a relational conception of human equality (Carmona 2021). This kind of trust is what makes testimonial exchanges between strangers function smoothly. Though I discuss it in the context of TV, this kind of trust might also be present on the side of the hearer when there is no epistemic injustice at work. *In the absence of counterevidence*, hearers often accord speakers a minimum level of competence and willingness for the mere fact of being human beings. This might be required for avoiding TI.

But this kind of trust, which I call *epistemic equality trust*, is not *hopeful*. *Epistemic equality trust* is about someone’s existing epistemic aptness, whether manifest or not, *in the absence of counterevidence*. It is a minimum of competence we ought to presuppose one another on the basis of the epistemic potential of every human being. I share Gerald Marsh’s (2011) insight that there is a baseline level of trust required for social cohesion “that we owe other human beings merely in virtue of their being human beings” (287).

Assuming we want a thriving society of fully developed epistemic equals, wouldn’t it make sense to extend hopeful epistemic trust to our fellow human beings regardless of age and context? In other words, wouldn’t it make sense to extend a certain amount of epistemic trust to our fellow human beings *despite the existence of counterevidence*?

As I see it, it could only bring benefits. First of all, extending this kind of trust doesn’t entail being deceived. Consequently, it doesn’t work against knowledge. I don’t think we need to understand extending hopeful trust as conflicting with judging correctly a piece of testimony. One of the many strengths of Brick’s piece lies in her insistence on the need to look at the context in order to judge what needs to be done to avoid epistemic neglect in particular cases (Brick 2020, 495). Thus, extending hopeful trust will entail a variety of things depending on the characteristics of each case. For instance, extending hopeful trust depends “on the particularities of the individual child [knower] involved” (495, my addition in square brackets). Besides, extending hopeful trust to the same knower might entail different things in different situations.

In the cases explored by Brick, extending hopeful trust is not incompatible with attributing to a piece of testimony the level of credibility that it deserves. Brick makes explicit that

“extending hopeful trust to children does not require according them an inflated level of credibility” and that “drawing a child’s attention to their inaccuracy” (495) might be the right thing to do in certain occasions. In other words, one might extend hopeful trust to someone despite showing them that a particular statement of theirs is not true. In fact, the idea that one has limitations lies at the core of the concept of hopeful trust. After all, one extends hopeful trust to instill in that person that their “potential outstrips performance” (495).

Toward Non-Marginalized Identities

With this background in mind, wouldn’t it make sense to think that human beings generally owe one another hopeful trust, a trust concerning our capacities to work on ourselves and improve, enabling the outstripping of past performance? Shouldn’t we be particularly generous when extending this kind of trust to marginalized identities, so as to compensate the negative picture of themselves as knowers, but also generally as people, that they are constantly confronting, as they are tracked by prejudice “through different dimensions of social activity” (Fricker 2007, 27)?

After all, even if non-marginalized identities might be able to build hopeful self-trust on the basis of evidence-based trust, hopeful trust coming from external factors is, without doubt, going to reinforce hopeful self-trust. Moreover, certain members of non-marginalized identities might be unable to build self-trust, let alone hopeful self-trust, on their own. For instance, consider someone who has been subjected to a highly localized form of epistemic violence or someone who is seriously underconfident. I would say that, unless it turns risky for either oneself or others, extending hopeful trust to one another is a moral duty, as it is likely to foster social cohesion and epistemic equality.

I say ‘risky’ because I have in mind *testimonial smothering* (TS). When TS is at work, “the speaker perceives one’s immediate audience as unwilling or unable to gain the appropriate uptake of proffered testimony” (Dotson 2011, 244). Speakers smother their testimony because they perceive their audience’s testimonial incompetence with respect to certain contents that they experience as particularly “unsafe and risky” (244). Under the influence of pernicious ignorance, such audiences “consistently fail to track certain truths” and “this failure to track the truth also happens to cause harm” (241). Of course, victims of TS have no moral duty to trust those who fail to show testimonial competence. On the contrary, it is the moral duty of the privileged to work on their own sensibilities and make sure that they meet the extra-demands that such a kind of context, where unsafe and risky content is involved, places upon them.

Would we be blameworthy if we failed to extend hopeful trust in our everyday epistemic interactions? While discussing Holton’s example of hopeful practical trust (of a shop owner who extends hopeful trust to their employ despite evidence that they are untrustworthy), Brick states that the reasons for which the shop owner acts when they extend hopeful trust leads to appropriate responses despite not making the shop owner vulnerable to criticism if they don’t act on them. Does the same hold true of hopeful epistemic trust in cases of non-marginalized adults?

I would say that the answer to that question depends on the sensibility motivated by the times we live in. In this regard, what we can be held responsible for depends on what we expect from one another, on the kinds of rules binding us together. In the kind of society of epistemic equals in which I would like to live, it would make sense to feel responsible if one failed to extend hopeful trust to a stranger. However, I would understand the view that the societies in which we live in nowadays don't commit us to extend hopeful trust to our fellow human beings for the mere fact of their being human beings.

Speaking and Hearing, Giving and Receiving

Let me address next the last point I want to make in this reply. Brick (2020) is committed to Fricker (2007)'s notion of *testimonial injustice* (TI) according to which TI occurs when a hearer does not provide the appropriate uptake to a speaker's testimony. Accordingly, *epistemic neglect* (EN) brings into view the obligation to trust children as *givers* of information, being information broadly understood. It might prove to be fruitful to think of EN in the context of the light shed by *testimonial void* (TV) on TI (Carmona 2021). TV is a variety of TI in which *speakers* fail to give their testimony under the influence of identity prejudice or other epistemic vices. In cases of TV, the speaker, either intentionally or unintentionally, withholds their testimony owing to their disregard for the hearer-to-be as a knower.

There might be cases of EN in which speakers commit the injustice by failing to trust knowers as competent *receivers* of information. For instance, we might be before an instance of EN when a prejudiced teacher fails to extend hopeful trust to a student by not providing them with a piece of feedback. Suppose the student has shown difficulty to understand the role of feedback and to learn from it in the past. That so, the teacher ought to hopefully trust their student with feedback in this occasion and in the future to make sure that they become a competent epistemic agent.

I have already drawn attention to the interaction between EN and TV. I argued that avoiding TV might entail extending hopeful trust in certain contexts. Drawing from Brick, I put forward that in educational or medical care contexts those with epistemic authority might have the obligation to tell despite the hearer's past epistemic performance:

If the piece of testimony in question won't have a negative effect on the hearer, the speaker ought to tell for, if not at present, the hearer might be able to do something epistemically relevant with it in the future. Teachers often give feedback to learners who, not being ready to make use of it at that particular moment, can keep it in a safe place and use it in the future. When we deprive someone of an epistemic contribution, such a future development is hindered. So it is necessary to approach the epistemic aptness of the hearer-to-be from a long-term perspective. In this manner, having enough testimonial competence in such contexts might entail granting hopeful epistemic trust with a view to enabling future epistemic relational equality. The assessment of when hopeful trust ought to be extended will need close evaluation (Carmona 2021, 11).

However, good pedagogical practice often entails withholding epistemic materials, as learners might not be ready for them just yet. Accordingly, the line between committing EN and good pedagogical practice might be thinner when looking at EN from the perspective of TV than it is in the cases considered by Brick, in which the hearer is the perpetrator of the injustice. Consequently, paying close attention to context will be here at least as important as in the cases proposed by Brick.

Observe that Brick develops her notion of EN in conversation with Holton (1994)'s notion of hopeful practical trust. Holton's examples are neither restricted to the context of education nor to children. Moreover, Brick's depictions of EN, despite assuming that the speaker is the target of the injustice and the hearer the wrongdoer, is not inconsistent with the idea that a speaker can commit the injustice. After all, Brick (495) draws our attention to knowers' epistemic competence, even though as givers of information, and epistemic competence also entails being apt to receive information. Extending the limits of EN as proposed in this reply might in fact be latent in Brick's insightful paper.

References

- Brick, Shannon. 2020. "Epistemic Neglect." *Social Epistemology* 34 (5): 490-500.
- Carmona, Carla. 2021. "Silencing by not Telling: Testimonial Void as a New Kind of Testimonial Injustice." *Social Epistemology* 1-16. doi: 10.1080/02691728.2021.1887395.
- Dotson, Kristie. 2011. "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Practices of Silencing." *Hypatia* 26 (2): 236-257.
- Fricker, Miranda. 2007. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Holton, Richard. 1994. "Deciding to Trust, Coming to Believe." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 72 (1): 63-76.
- Karen, Jones. 2012. "The Politics of Intellectual Self-Trust." *Social Epistemology* 26 (2): 237-251.
- Karen, Jones. 1996. "Trust as an Affective Attitude." *Ethics* 107 (1): 4-25.
- Marsh, Gerald. 2011. "Trust, testimony, and Prejudice in the Credibility Economy." *Hypatia* 26 (2): 280-293.